

# Sarmiento Describes the Gaucho, 1845

[Historical note: Excerpted from *LIFE IN THE ARGENTINE REPUBLIC IN THE DAYS OF THE TYRANTS; Or, CIVILIZATION AND BARBARISM*. By DOMINGO F. SARMIENTO, MINISTER PLENIPOTENTIARY FROM THE ARGENTINE REPUBLIC TO THE UNITED STATES. Translated by MRS. HORACE (Mary) MANN Spanish original 1845; English translation 1868.

Educator, statesman, and writer, Sarmiento (1811-88) rose from rural schoolmaster to become president of Argentina (1868-74). As president, he laid the foundations for later national progress by fostering public education, stimulating the growth of commerce and agriculture, and encouraging the development of rapid transportation and communication. As a writer, he is best remembered for his sociological-biographical study *Civilización y barbarie: vida de Juan Facundo Quiroga, y aspecto físico, costumbres, y hábitos de la República Argentina* (1845; *Life in the Argentine Republic in the Days of the Tyrants; or, Civilization and Barbarism*), a plea for industrialization and urbanization as opposed to the culture of the gauchos of the Argentinian pampas.

Largely self-taught, Sarmiento began his career as a rural schoolteacher at the age of 15 and soon entered public life as a provincial legislator. His political activities and his outspokenness provoked the rage of the military dictator Juan Manuel de Rosas, who exiled him to Chile in 1840. There Sarmiento was active in politics and became an important figure in journalism through his articles in the Valparaíso newspaper *El Mercurio*. In 1842 he was appointed founding director of the first normal school in South America and began to give effect to a lifelong conviction that the primary means to national development was through a system of public education.

During that period in Chile, Sarmiento wrote *Facundo*, an impassioned denunciation of Rosas' dictatorship in the form of a biography of Juan Facundo Quiroga, Rosas' tyrannical gaucho lieutenant. The book has been criticized for its erratic style and oversimplifications, but it has also been called the single most important book produced in Spanish America. In 1845 the Chilean government sent Sarmiento abroad to study educational methods in Europe and the United States. After three years he returned, convinced that the United States provided the model for Latin America to follow in its development. Sarmiento returned to Argentina to help overthrow Rosas in 1852; he continued his writing and educational activities and reentered Argentinian politics.

Sarmiento was elected president of Argentina in 1868 and immediately began to apply his liberal ideals—his belief in democratic principles and civil liberties and his opposition to dictatorial regimes in any form—to the building of a new Argentina. He ended the war with Paraguay inherited by his administration and concentrated on domestic achievements. To a largely illiterate country he brought primary and secondary schools, normal schools and schools for professional and technical training, and libraries and museums. When his term ended in 1874, Sarmiento continued to be active in public life. Most of the 52 volumes of his published work are

*devoted to educational themes. Below you'll find his views about gauchos and gaucho life, expressed in his famous 1845 polemic.*

*Although Argentina had no large indigenous population to factor into its quest for national identity, racial considerations, nevertheless, played a critical part in how Argentines viewed themselves, especially in an era shaped by ideas of "scientific racism." Sarmiento's famous essay on civilization and barbarism in Latin American used a racial duality as a means of understanding Argentina's post-independence successes and failures. The white upper-class population of Buenos Aires mimicked European culture, fashion, and political traditions. The caudillos (military strongmen, such as Facundo and Rosas), who represented their rural counterparts, had far less regards for things European. In the concluding section, Sarmiento discusses how political symbolism embodied and reflected the essential dualities--civilization versus barbarism, and pure versus mixed blood--of Argentine society. Thanks to Professor Richard Slatta for permission to reproduce this translation and introduction from his web site.]*

To what extent may not the independence of that part of America be due to the arrogance of these Argentine gauchos, who have never seen anything beneath the sun superior to themselves in wisdom or in power? The European is in their eyes the most contemptible of all men, for a horse gets the better of him in a couple of plunges. Argentine General Lucio Mansilla said, in a public meeting during the French blockade, "What have we to apprehend from those Europeans, who are not equal to one night's gallop?" and the vast plebeian audience drowned the speaker's voice with thunder of applause.

If the origin of this national vanity among the lower classes is despicable, it has none the less on that account some noble results; as the water of a river is no less pure for the mire and pollution of its sources. Implacable is the hatred which these people feel for men of refinement, whose garments, manners, and customs, they regard with invincible repugnance. Such is the material of the Argentine soldiery, and it may easily be imagined what valor and endurance in war are the consequences of the habits described above. We may add that these soldiers have been used to slaughtering cattle from their childhood, and that this act of necessary cruelty makes them familiar with bloodshed, and hardens their hearts against the groans of their victims.

Country life, then, has developed all the physical but none of the intellectual powers of the gaucho. His moral character is of the quality to be expected from his habit of triumphing over the obstacles and the forces of nature; it is strong, haughty, and energetic. Without instruction, and indeed without need of any, without means of support as without wants, he is happy in the midst of his poverty and privations, which are not such to one who never knew nor wished for greater pleasures than are his already. Thus if the disorganization of society among the gauchos deeply implants barbarism in their natures, through the impossibility and uselessness of moral and intellectual education, it has, too, its attractive side to him. The gaucho does not labor; he finds his food and raiment ready to his hand. If he is a proprietor, his own flocks yield him both; if he possesses nothing himself, he finds them in the house of a patron or a relation. The necessary care of the herds is reduced to excursions and pleasure parties; the branding, which is like the harvesting of farmers, is a festival, the arrival of which is received with transports of joy, being the occasion of the assembling of all the men for twenty leagues around, and the opportunity for

displaying incredible skill with the lasso. The gaucho arrives at the spot on his best steed, riding at a slow and measured pace; he halts at a little distance and puts his leg over his horse's neck to enjoy the sight leisurely. If enthusiasm seizes him, he slowly dismounts, uncoils his lasso, and flings it at some bull, passing like a flash of lightning forty paces from him; he catches him by one hoof, as he intended, and quietly coils his leather cord again. . . .

The society of the agricultural districts is also much subdivided and dispersed, but on a smaller scale. One laborer assists another, and the implements of tillage, the numerous tools, stores, and animals employed, the variety of products and the various arts which agriculture calls to its aid, establish necessary relations between the inhabitants of a valley and make it indispensable for them to have a rudiment of a town to serve as a center. Moreover, the cares and occupations of agriculture require such a number of hands that idleness becomes impossible, and the men of an estate are compelled to remain within its limits. The exact contrary takes place in the singular society we are describing. The bounds of ownership are unmarked; the more numerous the flocks and herds the fewer hands are required; upon the women devolve all the domestic duties and manufactures; the men are left without occupations, pleasures, ideas, or the necessity of application. Home life is wearisome and even repulsive to them. They need, then, factitious society to remedy this radical want of association. Their early acquired habit of riding gives them an additional incentive to leave their houses.

It is the children's business to drive the horses to the corral before the sun has quite risen; and all the men, even the lads, saddle their horses, even when they have no object in view. The horse is an integral part of the Argentine rustic; it is for him what the cravat is to an inhabitant of the city. In 1841, El Chacho, a chieftain of the Llanos, emigrated to Chili. "How are you getting on, friend?" somebody asked him. "How should I be getting on?" returned he, in tones of distress. "Bound to Chili, and on foot!" . . . .

The gaucho esteems skill in horsemanship and physical strength, and especially courage, above all other things, as we have said before. This meeting, this daily club, is a real Olympic circus where each man's merit is tested and assayed. The gaucho is always armed with the knife inherited from the Spaniard. More fully even than in Spain is here realized that peninsular peculiarity, that cry, characteristic of Saragossa—war to the knife. The knife, besides being a weapon, is a tool used for all purposes; without it, life cannot go on. It is like the elephant's trunk, arm, hand, finger, and all. The gaucho boasts of his valor like a trooper, and every little while his knife glitters through the air in circles, upon the least provocation, or with none at all, for the simple purpose of comparing a stranger's prowess with his own; he plays at stabbing as he would play at dice.

So deeply and intimately have these pugnacious habits entered the life of the Argentine gaucho that custom has created a code of honor and a fencing system which protect life. The rowdy of other lands takes to his knife for the purpose of killing, and he kills; the Argentine gaucho unsheathes his to fight, and he only wounds. To attempt the life of his adversary he must be very drunk, or his instincts must be really wicked, or his rancor very deep. His aim is only to mark his opponent, to give him a slash in the face, to leave an indelible token upon him. The numerous scars to be seen upon these gauchos, accordingly, are seldom deep. A fight is begun, then, for the sake of shining, for the glory of victory, for the love of fame. . . .

Will it be believed that these displays of valor or skill and boldness in horsemanship are the basis of the great exploits which have filled the Argentine Republic lie with their name and changed the face of the country? Nothing is more certain, however. I do not mean to assert that assassination and crime have always been a ladder by which men have risen. Thousands of daring men have remained in the position of obscure bandits; but those who owe their position to such deeds are to be counted by larger numbers than hundreds. In all despotic societies, great natural gifts tend to lose themselves in crime; the Roman genius which could conquer the world is to-day the terror of the Pontine Marshes, and the Spanish Zumalacarreguis and Minas are to be met by hundreds in Sierra Morena. Man's need of developing his strength, capacity, and ambition, requires him, upon the failure of legitimate means, to frame a world, with its own morality and laws, where he shows complacently that he was born to be a Napoleon or a Caesar. In this society, then, where mental culture is useless or impossible, where no municipal affairs exist, where, as there is no public, the public good is a meaningless word, the man of unusual gifts, striving to exert his faculties, takes with that design the means and the paths which are at hand. The gaucho will be a male factor or a military chief, according to the course which things are taking at the moment when he attain celebrity. Such customs need vigorous methods of repression, and to retain hardened men, judges still more hardened are required.

Like all civil wars in which deep differences of education, belief, and motives divide the parties engaged in them, the internal warfare of the Argentine Republic was long and obstinate, until one of the elements of the strife was victorious. The Argentine Revolutionary War was twofold: 1st, a civilized warfare of the cities against Spain; 2d, a war against the cities on the part of the country chieftains with the view of shaking off all political subjection and satisfying their hatred of civilization. The cities overcame the Spaniards, and were in their turn overcome by the country districts. This is the explanation of the Argentine Revolution, the first shot of which was fired in 1810, and the last is still to be heard.

To make the ruin and decadence of civilization and the rapid progress of barbarism perceptible to the reader, I must select two cities—one already annihilated, the other insensibly proceeding towards barbarism -- La Rioja and San Juan. La Rioja was formerly a city of some account, but its own sons would fail to recognize it in its present condition. . . . Let us now look at the condition of La Rioja, as exhibited by the answers given to one of the many inquiries I have instituted for the purpose of gaining a thorough knowledge of the facts on which I base my theories. These are the statements of a reliable person, who was unacquainted with my object in investigating his memory of matters that must have been fresh in his mind, for it was only four months before that he left Rioja.

1. What is about the actual amount of the population of Rioja city? Answer: About fifteen hundred souls. It is said that only fifteen adult males reside in the city.
2. How many persons of note live in it? Answer: Six or eight in the city.
3. How many lawyers' offices are open there? Answer: None.
4. How many men wear dress-coats? Answer: None.
5. How many young men from La Rioja are studying at Cordova or Buenos Ayres? Answer: I know of only one.

This was the famous fight at Tala, the first exploit of Quiroga beyond the limits of his province. He had conquered "the bravest of the brave," and kept his sword as a trophy of the victory. Will he stop there? But let us see the force which sustained itself against the colonel of the 13th regiment, who overthrew a government to equip his company. Facundo raised at Tala a flag which was not Argentine, but of his own invention; namely, a black ground with a skull and cross-bones in the center. This was the flag which he had lost early in the engagement, and which he intended to recover, as he said to his routed soldiers, even at the mouth of hell. Terror, death, hell, were represented on the banner and in the proclamations of this general of the Llanos.

And there was still another revelation of the Arab-Tartar spirit of that power which was to destroy the cities. The Argentine colors are blue and white; the clear sky of a fair day, and the bright light of the disk of the sun: "peace and justice for all." In our hatred of tyranny and violence, we reject on our national flag warlike devices. . . . The Argentine revolution of independence was symbolized by two blue stripes and one white one; signifying, justice, peace, justice. The amendment made by Facundo and approved by Rosas, was a red band, signifying terror, blood, barbarism. In all ages this significance has been given to the color purple or red; study the history of those nations who have hoisted this color, and you will always find a Rosas and a Facundo -- terror, barbarism, and blood always prevailing. . . .